

EOC: At-Risk/Drop-out Interviews & Survey

**May/June
2005**

This report presents the comprehensive findings of a combined qualitative in-depth interview and quantitative survey study conducted on behalf of the Education Oversight Committee (EOC). The purpose of this study is to determine whether students have a different perspective regarding the reasons for difficulty in school and dropping out, compared to previous research on the same topic.

The study was conducted in May and June of 2005. School districts were contacted and with the assistance of principals and social workers, at-risk, drop-out and adult education students were identified and contacted to participate. These schools were chosen because they represented different types of students and school environments.

Thirty individual interviews were conducted and included:

- Eleven at-risk students currently in high school;
- Eleven high school drop-outs; and
- Eight high school drop-outs currently enrolled in adult education classes.

The interview was a combination of discussion and response to survey questions posed and recorded by the interviewer. The discussions with the students included questions regarding their family, household and personal education background as well as their

general attitudes toward school and education.

Both the qualitative discussion findings and the data collected from the questionnaires are included within the body of this report. It is important to note when reviewing the quantitative data that the total number of surveys completed for this project is only thirty and not a representative, randomly chosen sample of this population. Therefore, the data cannot be projected to the entire population and sampling error is not appropriate due to the small sample size.

Selected respondent comments are included throughout the report for illustrative purposes. While these comments have been taken directly from audio recordings of the individual interviews, they may be edited or paraphrased for readability.

Overview

For all of us, there are key variables that play major roles in the direction of our lives and the level of success (personal, financial and social) that we have the potential to attain. The primary variables for most people include:

- Relationships with our family, peers, and other influential adults (such as teachers, mentors, coaches, ministers, etc.)

EOC At-Risk/Drop-out Interviews & Survey

- Attained education and academic performance; and
- Personal/individual behaviors and choices.

Many of the findings from this study do not reveal new insights into why students have difficulty in school and why many ultimately drop out. Truancy, being held back, chronic health issues, expulsion, family needs and pregnancy are all issues that are well-known risk factors. The questions we want to answer are these:

- What can break the cycle of failure? and
- How can South Carolina increase the number of students who finish high school?

When the data is viewed in light of those key variables and questions, some trends and insights do emerge.

✓ Most of the respondents have weaknesses in developing and sustaining healthy relationships with at least one of these groups: family, peers or other adult authority figures such as teachers.

Lack of parental involvement, difficulty relating to other students and resistance to authority create a very thin margin for error in a high school environment that is now requiring these students to make more choices and take greater responsibility. Add in the increased social pressures from peers and, for many students, the margin for error all but disappears.

Some of these relationships are heavily damaged or unalterably changed by life-

changing events such as death or illness of a parent or close relative, pregnancy or difficult domestic situations that require these children to become adults too soon.

Many end up being part of the fringe of both social and academic life which can be reflected in their lack of involvement in extracurricular activities and often manifested in truancy and discipline problems. The current response is to treat the symptoms (truancy and discipline problems) and not necessarily the core problems.

The good news is that parents, peers, teachers and other adults such as mentors are all still extremely influential in these student's lives in terms of getting them to return to or stay in school. Many of the respondents who have dropped out or withdrawn from school and then returned to get their GED or adult education diploma have been and continue to be encouraged to complete their education by one or more of these groups.

✓ Most of the respondents have experienced academic difficulties or outright failure in the form of being held back at some point in their school careers. Much of this failure culminates during the first two years of high school and seems to be related to the increased social and academic pressures and responsibility mentioned previously.

The lack of mastery of the fundamentals of Math and English in particular begins to appear or becomes more magnified as the curriculum becomes more challenging in high school. Add in longer classes, learning disabilities,

depression, unstable home environments, and feelings that some courses are irrelevant and again, the margin for error becomes small.

In light of these academic difficulties, the availability of alternative education options is a very important positive factor in getting many of these students to stay in or return to school. Where they have failed in traditional situations, alternative options such as technical or more skill-based education and the availability of adult education and GED classes are extremely important.

✓ Every individual has a set of core values that drive our choices and behaviors. Core values are those things that are the measuring stick by which we make important and life-altering decisions and commitments. The question for this group of respondents is this: Is education a core value that influences and changes your decisions and behaviors?

All the respondents say that they believe that education is important and the majority indicate that education is valued in their household. However, for many respondents and parents, that belief in the importance of education doesn't seem to translate into an actual core value that influences and changes their decisions and actions.

Most people tend to minimize their own shortcomings when they look at the reasons for a problem or failure. These respondents are no different. For example, the majority of issues that are most frequently cited for causing school difficulties (truancy related to chronic health issues, being held back, expulsion, family needs and pregnancy)

all have more external factors involved that are outside of the particular student's control.

In contrast, many of the issues that were considered minor factors (bad attitude, laziness, feeling of futility, courses not being relevant, lack of cooperation, lack of parental involvement, and difficulty relating to other students) are more internally controlled factors.

Alternative educational options, making learning more fun and "hands-on," smaller classes and the presentation of real-world options and career opportunities are just some of the ways to have a positive influence in changing these respondents from simply saying that education is important, to actually believing it.

Specific Study Findings

Family and Household

Household Dynamics & Make-up

Respondents, regardless of status, have several things in common when it comes to their family and household situations.

Most respondents do not live with both of their biological parents. One-parent homes or one-parent with extended family (such as grandparents) or a step-parent or partner are common.

Other respondents either live with other family members, other families or on their own with a roommate. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents live with both their parents.

EOC At-Risk/Drop-out Interviews & Survey

Q2: Which of the following best describes your current living arrangement?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Live @ home 1 parent	37%	36%	46%	25%
Live @ home 2 parents	37%	36%	46%	25%
Live @ home 1 parent & step-parent/partner	13%	18%	0%	25%
Live on my own	3%	0%	0%	13%
Other	10%	9%	9%	12%

Many respondents come from large families, both biological and blended, with a large number of older siblings and half-siblings not currently living with them.

In some instances, the siblings are so much older and/or live in other areas of the state or country that the respondents have little or no contact with them. In other situations, these older siblings in particular have provided key roles as surrogate parents and mentors.

"My oldest brother has a GED, he has a job and he lives in Charlotte with his girlfriend, but my 19 year old brother who went back to New Jersey, he ain't doing nothing, out in the streets, doing this, doing that. That's not the kind of lifestyle that I would like to have."

Q5: Do you have any brothers or sisters not currently living with you?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes	77%	82%	55%	100%
No	23%	18%	46%	0%

Q6: What are the ages of the brothers and/or sisters not currently living with you? (actual # vs. percentage: multiple responses allowed)

	TOTAL (N=23)	At-risk (N=9)	Drop-out (N=6)	Adult Ed (N=8)
under 18	9	1	2	6
18 and over	47	18	11	18

Education of Other Household Members

Most respondent's parents and older siblings did graduate from high school or received their GED, but most did not attend college.

Q7aa/ab: Did your mother graduate from high school? If so, did they attend college or tech school?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes, HS grad	70%	64%	82%	63%
No, HS grad	27%	27%	18%	38%
Don't know/NA	3%	9%	0%	0%
Yes, college	37%	36%	46%	25%

Q7ba/bb: Did your father graduate from high school? If so, did they attend college or tech school?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes	63%	64%	91%	25%
No	23%	9%	9%	63%
Don't know/NA	13%	27%	0%	13%
Yes, college	30%	27%	36%	25%

Q7ca/cb: Did your brothers/sisters 18+ graduate from high school? If so, did they attend college or tech school?

****Percentages do not equal 100% - multiple responses allowed****

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes	63%	55%	64%	75%
No	17%	18%	9%	25%
Don't know/ NA	20%	27%	27%	0%
Yes, college	23%	18%	36%	13%

Of those parents that attended some college, few seem to have actually graduated. Many of the older siblings have pursued other areas including the military or Job Corps as a means of learning marketable skills perhaps motivated by financial or academic constraints.

Moving

Exactly half of the respondents have changed addresses in the past five years. Most only changed addresses once or twice and the move required no change or only one change in schools in the majority of those instances.

Q8: During the past five years, how many times have you changed addresses?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
None	50%	55%	36%	63%
One	23%	18%	36%	13%
Two	10%	9%	18%	0%
Three to Five	10%	9%	9%	13%
Six or More	7%	9%	0%	13%

Q9: (Of those who changed addresses) How many of those times did an address change mean that you would need to change schools?

	TOTAL (N=15)	At-risk (N=5)	Drop-out (N=7)	Adult Ed (N=3)
None	27%	20%	43%	0%
One	40%	40%	43%	33%
Two	7%	0%	14%	0%
Three to Five	20%	20%	0%	67%
Six or More	7%	20%	0%	0%

For those that did change schools, adjusting to the new school and making new friends could be difficult.

"It (moving) was hard. When I first got here, I didn't want to do nothing because I didn't know nobody. I felt like everybody was talking about me."

"(Moving) made my grades bad because me and my sister, we was moving back and forth and we was moving all around."

"I grew up in a school that was really small compared to Lexington. And when I moved over there, it was huge and it was harder for me to find people that had similar things (in common) with me."

Life Changing Events

Many of the respondents have experienced life-altering changes in their young lives such as pregnancy, death or illness of a parent or close relative or difficult domestic situations.

"My father, he got really sick and he passed away. See, my mother, this is her hometown. After my father died, she decided to move back down here so that she could be closer to her family."

"The reason that I quit (school) was because of my parents. My mom got really sick. She didn't want me to quit school. She wanted me to keep going, but you know, I had to quit because she was really sick and I had to take care of her. (My dad) was working and I wanted to work too and help him out."

"When I got pregnant with my baby, I couldn't go to school because I was a high risk. I went to the doctor Tuesday through Friday."

"(My Dad) passed away when I was 15 years old. It wouldn't have been so bad, but it was three days from my birthday and then on my birthday, the funeral was held. It just hit me hard, like I could break down. I just couldn't function. I'd just forget things and I'd come home from school and sleep. I could have had the best day at school and then, just like that, it would change. Mom would tell me to do something and we'd get into an argument. It was bad."

"My dad has been sick and just last month, we had five deaths in the family all together. My uncle died first, and then my grandma died three days later."

These major situations in the student's lives often lead to missed days and schoolwork, leaving them even farther behind or causing them to exceed their total number of absences and getting in trouble for truancy.

Personal Education Assessment

Although moving is a major reason to change schools, many respondents also attended multiple high schools (primarily

alternative high schools) because of discipline or attendance problems.

In fact, half of the respondents attended at least one school (either middle or high school) for one year or less creating consistency issues both socially and academically.

"I went to the high school first, and then I got in trouble, so I got sent to an alternative school (for six months). Then I went to _____ Academy for six months. Then I went back (to the high school) for a year and then they sent me over here to the alternative school. When the alternative school got closed down, I went back (to the regular high school) and got in trouble again and then I came over here (to the adult education center)."

Q11: How long were you at each school? (includes middle and high school responses)

****Percentages do not equal 100% - multiple responses allowed****

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
1 year or less	50%	27%	55%	75%
Two years	60%	55%	73%	50%
Three years	67%	73%	82%	38%
Four years	17%	36%	9%	0%

Employment vs. Attending School

For those respondents not currently enrolled in high school or adult education, only a little over a third are currently working. Most of the others indicate that they are trying to find a job or have just quit and are looking for a new job.

Q13: (Among those not enrolled in HS or adult education) What do you do rather than attending school?	
	Dropped Out (N=11)
Work	36%
Not working right now/just quit	36%
Trying to get a job or a new job	18%
Nothing	9%

Most do not seem happy with their current jobs or the caliber of jobs available to them without a high school diploma or GED. Some have seen friends and family suffer because of their lack of education.

"I don't want to be like my older brother. He can't hardly get a job. He don't have no kind of education. I don't want to be like that."

"I used to work in a restaurant since I dropped out of school, and I did not like it. I said, "I want a better life than this. I don't want to work in a restaurant for the rest of my life." That's what really got me that I wanted to go back to school and get my GED or do something with my life."

"Right now, when I get up in the morning, I'm just like, "I don't want to go to work today." But I know I have to because I know I need the money so I can start saving up and paying my bills and start learning what it's like out in the real world."

Credits Earned and Grades Completed

Almost two-thirds of the respondents have only earned enough high school credits to complete 10th grade. Almost one-half do not know how many high school credits they have even earned.

Q14: What grade of school have you completed to date?				
	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
8th grade	10%	18%	0%	13%
9th grade	13%	27%	9%	0%
10th grade	40%	36%	46%	38%
11th grade	30%	9%	36%	50%
12th grade	3%	9%	0%	0%

Q15: How many high school credits have you earned so far?				
	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
10 ½ - 15 credits	30%	18%	27%	50%
16-20 credits	17%	18%	9%	25%
21+ credits	6%	9%	9%	0%
Don't Know	47%	55%	55%	25%

The largest percentage of respondents consider their area of study concentration to be or have been technical prep versus college prep, although some indicated that they took some classes in both areas. The at-risk and the adult education students have a higher percentage of students that consider themselves to be in the tech prep track.

Q16: Which area of concentration were you/are you in – college prep or tech prep?				
	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
College prep	23%	0%	46%	25%
Tech prep	43%	73%	9%	50%
Both college & tech prep	17%	9%	36%	0%
Neither	10%	18%	0%	13%
Don't Know	7%	0%	9%	13%

Grade Retention

Of the thirty students interviewed, twenty-two (73%) were held back at least once during their school career. Of those, 59% were held back only once and 41% were held back twice. Drop-outs are more likely to have been held back more than once than at-risk or adult education respondents.

Some indicated that they weren't technically "held back" in a particular grade, but instead had to go to summer school or "double-up" on certain problem subjects during the same semester in order to gain enough credits to officially be considered a freshman, sophomore, etc. If these instances are included in the "held back" numbers, almost all of the respondents have been affected.

"I have the credits to be a senior, but I'm taking a sophomore class, so they classified me as a sophomore. That's why I'm not graduating this year."

Q17: Were you ever held back/required to repeat one or more grades?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes	73%	82%	64%	75%
No	27%	18%	36%	25%

Q18: (Among those that were held back) How many times were you held back?

	TOTAL	At-risk	Drop-out	Adult Ed
One	59%	67%	43%	67%
Two	41%	33%	57%	33%

Academic and other problems (discipline, social, etc.) seem to surface primarily in the first two years of high

school, and are chiefly manifested in poor grades and attendance problems.

Being held back in the 9th and 10th grade years (sometimes multiple times) seems to be a point at which many students cannot or are unwilling to recover so that they can finish their high school careers.

Q19: (Among those held back) What grade or grades were you held back in?

(actual # vs. percentage: multiple responses allowed)

	TOTAL (N=22)	At-Risk (N=9)	Drop-out (N=7)	Adult Ed (N=6)
5K-5 th grade	6	3	1	2
6 th - 8 th grade	6	4	0	2
9-10 th grade	16	4	9	3
11 th grade	1	0	0	1

"I think my freshman year is where I really messed up. Freshman year, I really didn't do too good as far as school-wise. I'm basically still making up for that year because I hardly ever did anything."

In particular, the lack of mastery of fundamentals such as Math and English begins to appear or become more magnified as the curriculum becomes more challenging during the high school years.

"I've failed 9th grade twice based on my math. I tried to pay attention and tried, but I don't understand math. I guess numbers confuse me or something."

"What makes school difficult for me? Trying to fit it all in my head. There's just so much different stuff that you got to know and you got to try and remember all of it. Like the lower classes, you got to

remember all that stuff all the way up to the last classes."

Truancy and missing days due to sickness or health problems is also a key factor in being held back. Other reasons mentioned by respondents include parents, drugs, not paying attention, teacher, chemistry class, and fighting.

Q20: (Among those held back) Why were you held back?

(actual # vs. percentage: multiple responses allowed)

	TOTAL (N=22)	At-Risk (N=9)	Drop-out (N=7)	Adult Ed (N=6)
English/ Writing	8	4	3	1
Math	7	2	3	2
Missed too many days	6	2	2	2
Health	2	1	0	1
Other	6	3	2	1

Being held back was a bad experience for many in terms of being left behind by their friends and their own feelings of failure. Others believe they benefited some from the additional instruction.

"(Being held back) was bad because all my friends left me and they went on to the middle school. It just made me feel terrible."

"It (being held back) makes me feel like I'm not smart enough to be in high school. But, I want to keep trying. That's the major thing."

"I was surprised when I failed 4th grade. It was the first time I failed because I got an F. I was crying about that and my mom decided to hold me back. Last year, I stayed back because I didn't want to go to school because I didn't feel comfortable at school. Everybody was always bothering me – all the administrators, they was always bothering me, like I was doing something wrong."

"(Being held back) was kind of good in one way because it helped me get more out of my math so that whenever I came up to high school, I had a better aspect of what was going to go on with math. The English was helpful too, but it was kind of boring doing the science and the other subjects over again."

Exit Exams

Twenty-four of the thirty respondents (80%) of those interviewed have taken an exit exam at least once.

Of those, only eleven (46%) actually passed all parts of the exam. Eighteen of the twenty-four students took the exam at least once in 2004.

Q21: Have you ever taken an Exit Exam?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Yes	80%	82%	73%	88%
No	13%	18%	9%	13%
Don't Know	7%	0%	18%	0%

EOC At-Risk/Drop-out Interviews & Survey

**Q23: (Among those who took the exit exam)
How did you do on the Exit Exam?**

(actual # vs. percentage: multiple responses allowed)

	TOTAL (N=24)	At-Risk (N=9)	Drop-out (N=8)	Adult Ed (N=7)
Passed	11	3	6	2
Failed	3	2	1	0
Passed Math/ Failed English	6	5	0	1
Passed English/ Failed Math	12	3	3	6
Don't Know/ No Answer	5	3	0	2

When asked about academic strengths and weaknesses, the responses are varied and many indicate that the inability to focus and pay attention is at the core of the problem.

"I'm smart. My weakness – I'm lazy. When it comes to writing papers, I write all the time so that's nothing to me. I can do it, It's just that I don't do it. I'm just lazy."

"When I was doing my work, I was good at Math and Reading."

"(My strengths) are carpentry, firefighting and small engines through the Tech Center. I'm working with my hands and not sitting at a desk all day."

Educational Plans for the Future

Almost all of the respondents want to complete their education by either getting their high school diploma or GED. Two of the drop-out respondents have already received their GED.

Q24: What are your plans for completing your education at this point ?

	TOTAL (N=30)	At-risk (N=11)	Drop-out (N=11)	Adult Ed (N=8)
Continue with HS & graduate	27%	73%	0%	0%
Re-enter HS & graduate	7%	0%	18%	0%
Adult Ed & get HS diploma	20%	0%	36%	25%
Plan to get GED	33%	18%	18%	75%
Job Corps	3%	0%	9%	0%
Have GED	7%	0%	18%	0%
Don't know/No plans	3%	9%	0%	0%

"I want to graduate because my Dad, he'll sit there and tell me, "You're never going to graduate." He's just always putting me down. So I want to prove him wrong and prove that I can graduate from high school. But, I'm struggling just to get out of 9th grade basically."

"The best thing is to stay in high school, but it's faster if you go in Job Corps. It's a faster process, because I don't want to be 20 years old and in 11th grade."

"Well, tomorrow is the big day of course. I take the GED test and then it's three to six weeks to get the results back. After I get that, I'm going to enroll in Midlands Tech. I want to be a Physical Therapist Assistant."

"I'm real interested in a college in Florida. A performing arts school. I called the Admissions Office and I asked them what was the requirements needed, and he said either a high school diploma or a GED."

"Some people might think if I don't graduate this year, I might as well just quit. But I never felt that way. I was thinking about doing adult school, but there's no need to do that. But I figure, it's just one year and I'd rather graduate one year later than never graduate at all."

"I plan to finish high school and after high school I plan to go to a four-year college to get my nursing degree."

"(I want to be a) firefighter. You have to have at least a high school diploma to even get up there for a paid firefighter. I also want to go to Midlands Tech or some technical school to study auto tech."

"I don't want to work at a fast food restaurant. I wanted to be a pediatrician, but I can't do that if I won't take the time to get an education."

Attitudes toward School & Education

The Best and Worst about High School

When asked about the things that they like best about high school, the most frequent responses include:

- Meeting people, social and sports activities
- Teachers, Principals and administrators
- Classes and choice of classes
- Learning; and
- Free time.

The worst things about high school for the respondents include many similarities to the previous list.

- Social problems, rumors and cliques;
- Teachers
- Demerit system/too many strict rules
- Kids fighting/violence
- Administrators and principals; and
- The day is too long/have to wake up too early.

"The best thing about high school is you learn a lot of stuff – a lot of different stuff and meet a lot of different people. I like some of the teachers and the way they teach. The worst thing is the kids. Some of the kids, they always want to fight and some teachers, they take advantage of you."

"I didn't really like high school that much. Sometimes there can be anywhere between 25-30 kids packed in one class with one teacher. And if you weren't in the "in crowd" and your Mom didn't drive a Cadillac or work for the school, people didn't like you. If it wouldn't have been for the social crowds and how they worked, my high school years would have probably worked a lot better."

"I like it (high school), but it's hard. As you get older, you get tired of coming. And then the hours are crazy, because in my district we get out at 3:00 and it's hard to concentrate (that long)."

"The rules (are the worst). I mean, they say "Stay in school," but they kick you out for stuff that has nothing to do with school, like your shirt or something. It seems like the administrators care more

about how you dress than your education.”

“I like the courses that get you ready for the real world and the teachers. When they teach, they help you understand more what you’re doing in class. And if you don’t understand it during class, they’ll stay after and help you or stay after school.”

Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

The majority of respondents are not currently or were not involved in extra-curricular activities in high school. They are not often involved in the core activities of school and seem to be on the fringe of both social and academic life.

The most frequently mentioned extra-curricular activities among the respondents interviewed included:

- High school sports
- Jr. ROTC
- Chorus; and
- Student government.

Bad grades, lack of interest and a diminished ability to multi-task and maintain grades are some of the reasons that these students are not involved in extra-curricular activities.

Key Factors That Make School Difficult

All of the respondents interviewed were asked to determine from a long list of factors, which issues were the most relevant to them personally in terms of school difficulty.

Each factor was determined by the respondent to be a major or minor factor or not a factor at all. The following factors are the most influential factors for this group of respondents in regards to their past or ongoing difficulties with school.

Q29: Please indicate the degree to which this issue has been relevant for you:

****Total percentages only: N=30****

	Major Factor	Minor Factor
Truancy	27%	30%
Being held back	23%	37%
Chronic health issues	23%	17%
Expulsion	23%	13%
Family needs	23%	10%
Pregnancy	17%	3%
Bad attitude	7%	63%
Laziness/Limited Effort	13%	43%
Feeling of futility	13%	33%
Courses not relevant	7%	27%
Lack of cooperation/resistance to authority	10%	23%
Difficulty relating to other students/not fitting in	13%	20%
Lack of parental involvement	7%	20%
Learning Disability	3%	20%

Truancy, followed closely by being held back are the most frequently cited reasons for school difficulties by the respondents. Both are complex issues that are often closely tied together and are usually symptoms of some of the other problems such as chronic health issues, family problems or pregnancy.

Students who are often having academic difficulties anyway, miss school for health, personal or disciplinary reasons and get even further behind, creating a negative cycle that is difficult to break.

Further exacerbating the problem, zero tolerance policies regarding truancy create very difficult situations for many of the respondents who then end up with few options and little guidance from the school that will no longer allow them to attend.

"I got to have some kind of education, you know. When they told me that I wouldn't have been able to go back to school and they can't help me or homeschooling and stuff, I cried because I really wanted to get an education because I knew I was going to have a baby."

"They just looked at me. They told me to go home and not come back and withdrew me."

Many students feel targeted or watched more closely than other students and believe that they are often not given the benefit of the doubt versus other students that are more academically or socially successful.

"Nobody really never listens to you at the school. Even if you are telling them the truth, they won't listen to us. They have to see it for themselves before they're able to believe you."

"Principals? Man, they're all the time on me. They're all the time watching everything I do because in 10th grade someone I rode to school with had drugs

in their car and I didn't know. I was guilty by association and I had to go to a drug treatment program for a month."

"I had a piece of fishing line through my eyebrow, so they told me to go home and not come back. Then I know somebody that the principal told them they could have the same thing as long as they wear a clear thing in it. Shouldn't they get the same thing I got?"

Of note, most of the minor factors seem to be issues that are more internally controlled and influenced. Although many of the major issues also are within the respondent's purview to control or influence (i.e. pregnancy or skipping school), these complex issues have more parts that are externally controlled.

Key Factors That Keep Students in School

The most positive influences for staying in school or returning to school include:

- Alternative education options
- Parents
- Mentors
- Teachers
- Work/job requirements; and
- Extra-curricular activities outside of school (such as church, job, etc.).

"I'm currently out of school, but my Mom's always on my back about going back to school. I want to go get my GED and I want to go to Midlands Tech and just keep on going. Starting to get my life together."

"One of my friend's fathers is kind of like my father figure right now. He looks out

EOC At-Risk/Drop-out Interviews & Survey

for me. We've sat down and talked. He's been trying to get me back to school and he wants me to work for him and then go to school. He's been trying to get me to set my life back up."

"My granddad's really been pushing me. He wants me to get a good education so I can get a good job."

"My cousins help me on my schoolwork. They keep me focused. If I'm having a problem with one of my subjects, then if one of them can help me, they'll help me."

"My boss has been pushing me. I've been working there for three months now and she's been pushing me really hard to get my GED."

Q31: To what degree would each of the following have a positive influence on getting you to stay in or return to school?

****Total percentages only: N=30****

	Major Influence	Minor Influence
Alternative Education Options	70%	23%
Parents	67%	13%
Adult Mentor	53%	30%
Teachers	43%	33%
Work/Job requirements	40%	33%
More extra-curricular activities (outside of school)	40%	13%

Other positive influences include the encouragement from other family and friends, the respondent's own goals and objectives and witnessing and/or living the reality of unemployment and/or low-paying jobs.

"It was my brother and mostly my friends. They all wanted me to go back to school bad."

"(A positive influence) is looking at some people that are struggling. Welfare, it's not bad if you have to, but like when you are struggling without it and you got kids and you're trying to put food in their mouths and stuff, that pushes me to get an education, because I don't want to be like that."

"I can work like my Dad. My Dad makes decent money, but he works really hard for the money, you know. I mean, it's not going to be much easier working, but I just have more opportunities with my GED."

The Value of Education

All of the respondents say that they believe that education is important and the majority indicate that education is valued in their household. Everyone seems to recognize the general importance of getting at least a high school diploma, but this belief doesn't seem to be influencing actions and decisions (both parents and students) as much as would be expected.

"I think it's (education) really important. I think it's really important because that's how you get a job and how you take care of yourself. Without an education, you can't even do nothing."

"I probably got a chance, but I don't got nobody to help me around the house to help me get an education. It's like nobody really cares. She (my mom) wants me to go to school, but you know, she don't care what I do though."

"(Education) is important because I have a lot of goals set and I can't not have an education to accomplish them. I want to make a lot of money because I want to take care of my Mom. She's taking care of me right now and I just want to get somewhere where I can make so much a year and pay off her debts and whatnot."

Many of the adult education and at-risk respondents seem to be more convinced of the value of education, having taken the action to return to or stay in school.

"Now I'm not graduating and I'm looking at the class that I basically grew up with from 4th grade and seeing that I'm not graduating with them – it's impacted me a lot. That's really motivating me so I do a lot better."

"It's a mix. You can't have an education and have no experience and expect to get a job with good pay real quick. And you can't just have experience and no education. You can't do a whole lot in this world without an education. You don't see people that dropped out in the 8th grade getting \$70,000, \$80,000 a year."

Overall, education is seen as important, but there are some who believe that many of the classes taught in high school are not really relevant for them or for what they want to do in the future.

"Education nowadays isn't as much as it used to be because they're teaching things that you don't really need to know. Like most of the stuff in math, half of that stuff you can learn in a college for what you really want to go into."

"I think it (education) is (important), but I don't think we should need some of the classes that we have to take. I could see taking English and Math, maybe some history, but I don't live in the past, so why do I need to know about it?"

Most of the respondents do not value a GED or an adult education high school diploma as highly as a regular diploma. An adult education diploma is better than a GED, but most believe that employers will give preference to a regular high school diploma applicant.

"Getting a high school diploma, it takes a long time and a lot of work. I would rather get my high school diploma, but it takes too much time and I got a baby and I got to hurry up and do something."

"I know a GED ain't better than a diploma because your diploma's showing that you went all the school years. The GED is basically like you understand half of it but not all of it."

"The GED is not the same as a high school diploma because you quit and then you end up going back. So, if on a job application they see you have your GED, (they might think) that you might just quit and give up on it."

Despite the fact that they do not value the GED and the adult education diploma as highly, many view the obstacles preventing them from returning to or completing high school as too great to overcome.

"I was never going to pass that math part. So there was no need for me to keep on taking it if I know I wasn't going to pass it. I just don't like math."

"I think a high school diploma is better, but if I was to stay in school right now, I think all I'd get was a GED. A high school diploma will get you farther in life. But, I can't see or focus on this. I got too much other stuff going on in my life, and I can't see or focus on my school. I'm just trying to relieve myself of some stress and just do what I got to do."

"I always had a hard time in school, not so much people-wise, but like class and stuff. Plus, I had a job and I'd be getting off a job late at night and I'd be falling asleep in class and not doing so good. So, I was just like, "Hey, I can't go to school and then go to a job, so I just have to go to Adult Education.""

"I know it (dropping out) ain't right. I want to stay in (school), but I just can't pass my English class."

How Would You Help Keep Students From Dropping Out?

At the end of each interview, each respondent was asked what they personally thought was the most important thing to change, to say or to do to help students stay in high school.

The primary areas for improvement that the respondents believe are important include:

- Making learning fun and more "hands-on"
- More one-on-one time with teachers after regular school hours and smaller classes overall
- Clear communication to at-risk students about the real world options available to them and exposure to

adults who have followed those routes or careers

- Mentoring programs; and
- Discipline for important issues versus dress code or tardiness.

The following are some of the comments and suggestions the respondents provided:

"I'd just show them how they was going to be in the future without education and how it is with education. Some people are living good and some people are living bad. I'm struggling right now and I ain't even out there yet."

"I'd like to set up an after-school program with teams of highly educated and qualified people to help students with different subjects. The teacher usually doesn't even stay after school half the time and if a tutor comes in, it's a kid – not somebody that knows."

"Help them (students) get stuff that they're interested in with schoolwork, instead of just having to sit in a classroom. Take them outside and do little math things outdoors. That's what would help us actually pass."

"If you want (to do) something and it's against school rules, wait until you graduate (to do it)."

"I would like to make school more fun. If a child feels like they can do it their own way, they're going to want to do it. Like math, I would just put it in a game. You'll have fun and still be learning at the same time."

"I would have more mentoring programs so that kids won't drop out of school. My aunt, she's a pastor at a church in Columbia and she's been helping me."

She's helped me strive for my goals in life."

"(They need) more teachers. Cutting classrooms down to size – less than thirty. You need more than one person to teach thirty kids because Bob up front might get it, but Bill in the back won't."

"(If I was a teacher) I would have discussions on how you feel and what's going on outside of school and stuff like that every Friday after work. A lot of times in school kids are missing because of their parents and their backgrounds and stuff. And after my lessons, I'd ask them how they're doing."

"Instead of disciplining for the right stuff they discipline them for the wrong stuff. Like, if I got an attitude with the teacher, I wouldn't really get in trouble for that. But if I was in the hallway being tardy, I would get in trouble for that."

Implications

What can break the cycle of failure for these students and help more South Carolina students graduate from high school? And despite the fact that these issues have been studied numerous times, what can be done now to make a difference?

Although there are many areas that need work and resources are always limited, the following are some thoughts and suggestions regarding areas of which the Education Oversight Committee should be aware.

✓ **Dealing with truancy differently:** Missing school and being held back are the primary symptoms of an at-risk high school drop out. Since truancy is such a

complex symptom caused by many different sources, it is difficult to treat only the symptom and not the source. Yet, that seems to be what is happening in many instances.

Dismissal from school based on missing too many days seems to be an easy way for schools to get rid of troublesome students that require a disproportionate share of resources and effort compared to other students. These are the same students that are not supposed to be left behind, but because of unrealistic high achievement standards, are in fact, left behind.

Some type of additional intervention, prior to a truant student being sent to court or the Department of Juvenile Justice should be considered. This intervention could include guidance and educational choices available and if required, emotional and vocational counseling.

✓ **Easing the transition between middle school and high school:** Prior to entering high school, all students are academically assessed, but most students, and especially those that are considered at-risk or score below basic, could benefit greatly from an additional review of "softer" issues. These areas of weakness or need might include previous problems with truancy and/or health, or difficult family or peer situations that may require counseling or additional guidance and support.

In addition, this is a good opportunity to reveal and perhaps shape a clearer understanding of a particular student's gifts and interests, enabling school administrators and teachers to teach

and respond more intentionally to those gifts and interests.

For those students who have moved multiple times and changed schools frequently, this assessment process might help begin to provide an academic and social consistency that might otherwise be difficult to achieve on their own.

✓ **Active learning versus only lecture:** We all have different ways in which we learn most effectively and this is especially true for many of these respondents. Many indicate that they wish school was more fun and that they don't see how some of the classes are applicable in real life. Others simply cannot focus for more than an hour and need a combination of lecture and application activities to keep them interested and engaged.

Smaller classes and more teachers would greatly enhance the ability to be more creative in the classroom, but again, strained resources are always an obstacle. Perhaps channeling students into areas of interest and skill and using active learning techniques can be used in concert to create academic success and as a result, a love of learning.

✓ **Creating a clearer purpose for alternative schools:** Alternative education options are the most important positive factor keeping students in school or encouraging them to return to school - more than parents, teachers or mentors. Development of more specific educational channels other than just the traditional college prep or tech prep are needed and might provide a much needed image boost for more skills-based education.

Currently, alternative high schools seem to function primarily as a holding tank for students who have gotten in trouble or have more severe emotional or learning disabilities. Students who go to these schools can benefit from the smaller classes and increased individual attention that they receive, but they cannot currently graduate from them.

If they cannot graduate from these schools, then they will ultimately be sent back to regular high school where many return to the failure and behavior patterns that they experienced before. Respondents indicate that they want an alternative way to graduate, not an alternative way to extend or delay their high school careers.

Providing alternative schools that have smaller classes, more active learning and a variety of subjects for study might be a better use of resources and actually provide a real alternative for these students.

✓ **School day start time:** Many of the respondents indicate that the school day starts very early and that between homework, employment and family, it is difficult to get enough sleep to get to school on time and/or stay awake in class once they are there. Perhaps more research is needed to address school start time as it applies to the best learning environments and amount of sleep needed for the most effective adolescent learning in particular.

✓ **Trying to understand the student's perspective and cultural background:** Administrators and teachers sometimes forget the perspective of the student and that they are processing information based on a teenager's level of maturity

and experience. In addition, as our communities become more and more diverse, understanding the social and communication norms for different cultural groups is very important in correctly interpreting some behaviors.

Many of the respondents perceived that they were treated unfairly or singled out for punishment. Whether or not this was actually the case is moot. It is what they perceive. Additional sensitivity and explanation may be needed from teachers and administrators to help a student actually understand a particular situation and its consequences.

Many of these thoughts and suggestions are similar to the intent of the recently passed legislation, The Economic and Education Development Act (Bill #3155), which requires districts to have an individualized graduation plan for every student, provide more guidance and counseling services and provide work/co-op opportunities.

This bill captures how crucial it is to holistically focus on individual students. It also can create an important opportunity for academic success which gives students a better chance to make it through those crucial 9th and 10th grade years and gain valuable experience and clearer career objectives.

In addition, these findings will have implications for a number of different organizations that are working on a number of different policies. This includes the South Carolina High School Redesign Commission which is tapping both education and business leaders to redesign the high school learning experience.

Can education become a core value for South Carolina students? Ultimately, this is the change that must occur before we experience sustained improvement in our graduation rates.

Providing intervention for truancy prior to it being treated as a crime, easing school transitions with intentional guidance and counseling, providing alternative schools, education options, and learning methods and developing a better understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and perceptions are just a few suggestions that could have a positive influence in keeping students in school and helping students ultimately internalize education as a core value.